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Humanitarian Assistance Under Fire

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Following is an address by James N. Purcell, Jr., Director, Bureau for Refugee Programs, before the annual meeting of "InterAction," the American Council for Voluntary International Action, McAfee, New Jersey, May 21, 1986.

As Director of the State Department's Refugee Bureau, I suppose I can be considered an expert on your topic today because I have had many opportunities to see humanitarian assistance "under fire" in both senses of the word:

- The challenge of delivering international emergency aid in conditions of armed conflict and political tension; and
- The challenge of surmounting the sometimes "hostile fire" of the U.S. budget process.

What strikes me as most memorable, however, as I look back on my 8 years with the refugee program, are not the difficulties of formulating and carrying out the needed programs—frustrating as that process often seemed at the time—but the many ways that we in the government and you in the private sector were able to work together figuratively to move humanitarian mountains.

Humanitarian Challenges and Accomplishments

It can be said that nothing looks so impossible as a problem just before it is solved. There have been times when I despaired of our ability to do what was needed to save lives and rescue people:

In Southeast Asia, as the tide of boat refugees turned into a flood in 1979;

In Cambodia, as the Vietnamese invasion uncovered the horrors of Pol Pot and then itself triggered a major humanitarian exodus;

In Pakistan, as the number of Afghan refugees repeatedly outstripped all predictions; and

In Africa, where the impact of natural disasters and manmade conflicts combined to drive tidal waves of people from their homelands.

Numbers lose ordinary meaning in these situations. The first 100,000 refugees are seen and photographed; outside help arrives, the world's attention is caught; the last 100,000, who raise the number of refugees in Pakistan from 2.4 million to 2.5 million, go almost unnoticed.

Later arriving refugees may be virtually within the statistical margin of error (a sometimes significant margin in refugee numbers, as those with field experience can attest). But all of them—the first 100,000, the last 100,000, and all those in between—are living, yearning people with human needs as great as our own. These have been sobering challenges.

What I remember best is what was accomplished:

- The worldwide resettlement effort that found homes for more than 1.5 million Indochinese, in what will stand as one of the great humanitarian rescue operations in history;
- The multilateral assistance effort that continues to feed and care for that vast population of Afghans in Pakistan; and
- The extraordinary international response to drought and political and military conflict throughout the Continent of Africa.

Each of these humanitarian challenges stands as a monument to our capacity to help—an expression of man's humanity to man (and woman)—even when the hurt is caused by mankind itself.

What you and we have been associated with can be called a decade of humanitarian assistance. I'm personally proud to have been a part of it. And it is not over.

If there is one thing we have learned it is that humanitarian aid is not a race for the short winded. We in government are seeing what you also have discovered, and that is that the need for international help in humanitarian emergencies is unending. As one problem comes under control, another comes to the fore. With modern communications and the penetrating eye of the camera, we have seen that the death of anyone anywhere affects us all, with consequent demands for help, for action.

The achievements of this decade of humanitarian assistance could not have been accomplished without the indispensable help of the voluntary agencies. Overseas you have shown, time and again, that when the going gets tough, the voluntary agencies get going.

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Often you lead the way for government, starting programs that we then join in supporting. You harness your private resources to those from governments and international organizations. You have demonstrated versatility and flexibility in adjusting your programs to meet new needs.

Your diversity is part of your strength, enabling you to work with local counterparts and to develop support groups with whom you can have unique relationships. Your wider organizational ties, your outreach to your memberships and networks, in the United States and internationally, add perspective to your vision and, in practical terms, give you a natural constituency for staffing and fund-raising. Simply put, I don't know what we would do without you.

Refugee Resettlement Programs

My own bureau has had its longest ties with those among you working with our refugee resettlement programs—the agencies represented on your Committee on Migration and Refugee Affairs. Let no one underestimate the multiplier effect generated by the voluntary agency role.

Other countries have generous programs, providing refugees the benefits of social services offered by modern welfare states. A government office sees to the settlement of each family, using hostels, locating apartments, assuring adequate medical care. They do a good job, but they are limited by the direct capacity of a government to support the refugees. And the numbers so aided generally remain quite low.

In the United States, we recall that over 200,000 refugees arrived here in the peak year of 1980, and the total admission of refugees in the past 10 years has been well over 1 million. Taking advantage of your domestic structures—your churches, synagogues, community centers—you expanded your programs to rise to the challenge of this modern exodus. It was a heroic accomplishment, and all who worked on it can take pride in what was accomplished.

In these resettlement programs, the U.S. Government and the voluntary agencies forged what can be described as a "special relationship" in which each has drawn on the strengths of the other. There have been disagreements, but I believe, on the whole, the strains have contributed to a "creative tension" that has kept our refugee programs in tune with changing conditions in a time of financial constraints and shifting priorities.

Time and again in the past 8 years, representatives of other countries at international meetings complimented the United States on our private voluntary agency system. Since sometimes I was the only U.S. representative present, I accepted the compliments, and now I want to return them to you.

The contributions of the private sector have made it possible to accomplish virtual miracles of refugee resettlement. As I said, we couldn't have done it without you.

The Changing Nature of the Refugee Problem

The job isn't finished, as the Indochinese Refugee Panel chaired by former Governor Bob Ray of Iowa recently reminded us. But it is changing, and that brings me to the second point I want to make about our voluntary agency system.

Just as you showed your ability to expand your programs to come to the aid of refugees arriving in the United States from Indochina—as you did in the past for Cubans and Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, and Soviet Jews—I want you to help us now to accomplish the necesssary shift in our programs toward helping refugees in the regions of their homeland.

In his remarks to you yesterday, the new UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Jean-Pierre Hocke, described the changing nature of the refugee challenge:

- The far larger numbers of refugees now in entire regions of first asylum, spilling across national frontiers;
- The presence of refugees in countries and regions which are themselves among the poorest of the poor; and
- The need to integrate short-term aid with longer term durable solutions, while observing the "fine line" that divides refugee assistance from host country development.

Let me add to those points, speaking from the perspective of the country that has accepted the largest numbers of refugees in recent years, the declining importance of third-country resettlement as a solution for most refugee situations in the world. The very numbers of refugees force us to acknowledge the validity of this last point:

- Over 3 million Afghans, 2½ million of them in Pakistan alone; the United States is resettling at most 3,000 a year—one-tenth of 1%; and
- Nearly 3 million refugees in Africa, with a similar proportion potentially coming to the United States—again, a fraction of 1%.

While these resettlement limits are set by our congressional consultation process, they also respond to the prevailing attitudes within the various regions. In Africa especially, there is sensitivity about proposals to move refugees to distant third countries—a solution which Africans view with suspicion as a further step toward the "brain drain" that is so widely criticized.

At the first African refugee conference in Arusha, Tanzania, in 1978, Africa's senior statesman, Julius Nyerere, set the theme: "We welcome the refugees, we give them our land. But we need outside assistance." The two International Conferences on Assistance to Refugees in Africa (ICARA I and II) echoed that theme: assistance to refugees *in* Africa, not resettlement *from* Africa.

We are aware of similar attitudes among the Afghans, who look to a future return to their own country, and among the nearly quarter million Khmer on the Thai-Cambodian border. These are people who need emergency relief and the opportunity for self-support through productive work while they wait for that best of all solutions for a refugee problem—safe, voluntary repatriation to their homelands.

New Solutions and Changing Roles

This changing reality challenges us to look beyond the resettlement option in favor of other durable solutions. And it implies a changing role for the voluntary agencies in their involvement with refugees.

This can be an exciting period for voluntary agencies as you consider the ways you can relate to the new team now giving leadership to the UNHCR. The High Commissioner has told us of his need for implementing partners in refugee situations throughout the world. Your diversity can be part of your strength in responding to the High Commissioner's challenge: each of you has qualifications that may be right for one refugee situation or another.

Different voluntary agencies will see different roles for themselves in different situations. Some will carry out their work "under fire," in situations of military conflict and political tension. Others will concentrate on longer term programs—education, child care, infrastructure improvements, avoiding the conflict situations in which development aid runs up against the political reality of battle lines and contested frontiers.

We hear, from time to time, the assertion that the humanitarian assistance appropriated by Congress for Afghans, Cambodians, and Nicaraguans in some way violates the Geneva conventions and protocols. This assertion suggests that there is a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose and scope of the Geneva conventions, and so I think it would be useful to say a few words about them.

There are four separate Geneva conventions of 1949, dealing with the protection of various categories of war victims, including sick and wounded members of the armed forces, prisoners of war, and civilians. Additional provisions are set forth in two protocols, which the United States has signed but not ratified.

One important function of the Geneva conventions is to guarantee the right of humanitarian organizations—in particular, the International Committee of the Red Cross—to provide certain types of assistance in times of war. Neither the conventions nor the protocols, however—and this is key—prohibits anyone from providing any other form of assistance, either to armed forces or to civilian populations.

In other words, the Geneva conventions establish a minimum level of assistance which must always be permitted. But they do not preclude anyone from providing additional humanitarian aid to one side or the other, beyond the required minimum.

Indeed, at no point do the conventions or protocols even define the term "humanitarian assistance." Thus, the actions of the U.S. Government in providing nonlethal or humanitarian assistance to people involved in political or military conflict situations cannot violate the legal standards of the Geneva conventions or the protocols.

To suggest, as some of you have, that humanitarian aid should only be provided on an equal basis to both sides in a conflict would prevent courageous medical teams from providing life-saving medical aid inside Afghanistan; would eliminate hospitals and medical stations for Afghan refugees in Pakistan; would militate against the surgical wards treating victims of fighting at the Thai-Cambodian border; and would rule out other worthwhile programs throughout the world.

In theory, one can agree that all humanitarian aid should be available to both sides; in practice, such a philosophy would prevent major life-sustaining programs in situations throughout the world in which access is available only to one side or the other.

As U.S. citizens, all of us have the right to participate in the political process that governs our country and sets direction for government policies at home and abroad. Within that framework, private citizens and organizations have the freedom to support or disagree. But as agencies committed to humanitarian aid, I hope you will concentrate your efforts on programs in which you are prepared to help rather than opposing those with which you may disagree but which others among you are prepared to support.

Voluntary Organizations in the UN Context

Some of you already have experience as implementing partners for UNHCR, and from what you have told us, we know it can be an exciting role for a voluntary agency. In many cases, the host government itself serves as the prime contractor for UNHCR through offices established to coordinate the international response to the refugee crisis, as in Somalia, Sudan, and Pakistan.

For voluntary organizations to succeed in this environment can require diplomatic skill as well as operational capacity. Both are essential, particularly in situations where private agencies seek to provide "turnkey" services across the board in a given country or region.

My understanding is that there will be a growing role for such "major contractors" as UNHCR moves toward improved cooperation with UNDP [UN Development Program] and other parts of the UN system to integrate refugee and other emergency responses with longer term development needs. This was the theme of ICARA II, and we have seen its validity confirmed most recently in the combination of drought and refugee needs in the Horn of Africa.

The new vigor of the international system for emergency aid can also be seen in the success of the UN coordinators who helped create a "teamwork" approach for humanitarian assistance on the Thai-Cambodian border and in Ethiopia.

Three UN senior statesmen—Sir Robert Jackson, Kurt Jansson, and Brad Morse—deserve much of the credit, and we hope their success has set the United Nations on a path in which appointment of such coordinators will become part of the customary solution to the problems that involve not just one country but an entire region, not just one UN agency but the international system as a whole.

As American private voluntary organizations, you may want to strengthen your ability to be part of that process. For our part, in the State Department's refugee program, the international, multilateral structure will continue to be the predominate way in which we will participate in overseas refugee assistance activities and through which we can support your participation.

That is because our approach to helping refugees will continue to place the greatest emphasis on the international organizations that have proven their value in finding nonpolitical, humanitarian solutions to refugee problems.

The organizations we deal with the most—the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM), the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies—all give us the benefit of a multilateral approach to solving refugee problems and—just as important in the era of Gramm-Rudman-Hollings—a pooled approach to raising the funds needed to deal with those problems.

With new leadership at UNHCR; with continued strength at the Red Cross and ICM; with the acceptance of UN system coordination, where needed, to harness the capacities of many agencies, I believe the multilateral approach will continue to be the way for us to go. I hope each of you will find ways to be part of it. ■

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